

6/5/04 This is the second draft of the chapter on Position in Hold'em Brain by King Yao. Please email feedback, suggestions, comments, opinions, questions to KingYao@HoldemBrain.com or you could use the Feedback Form to email me at the bottom of the page.

Hold'em Brain: Position

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Hold'em is a fixed positional game. The early position players have to act first in every round, with the exception of the blinds in the pre-Flop round. Before the late position players have to act, they are able to see the actions of the players in early and middle position. This information is valuable, and good players will use it to their advantage. For example, say you have a mediocre hand. You are the second player to act and there are four players left in the hand. If the first player bets, it puts you in a bit of a bind. You do not know if one of the players after you will raise, call or fold. You will not be as sure of the expected pot size or how much you will have to put in to see the next card. You may think your hand is just strong enough to play against the first player and one bet, but not two bets. If you knew a player behind you was planning to raise, you may have preferred to fold since you do not want to commit two bets on the particular hand. Without knowing what the players after you are planning to do, you are forced to make a tough decision. On the other hand, if you were the fourth and last player to act in this hand, you would have a much better idea of how to proceed, because you would have seen the actions from the second and third players. Now if they both fold, you know that there cannot be a raise behind you as no one can act after you act since the bettor cannot raise himself. If either the second or third player raises, then you can fold since you would prefer not to see the next card for two bets. Being last to act gives you much more information than being one of the first to act.

Position can change from round to round

Positional advantage can change a bit on any single round. Let's say you are first to act on the Turn and there are three other players in the hand at the time. You decide to check a mediocre hand, and the next player bets. If there are no raises, it means when the action gets back to you, you have perfect information about that round as there cannot be a raise after you call the bet. In this particular instance, you have given yourself a bit of a positional advantage, the value of which depends on your cards, the board, the players and the situation. Nevertheless, your position on this round is stronger than the third player's position who must act without knowing what the fourth player or you will do. If you have a good idea that the player who acts after you will bet, then you may be able to use that information to your advantage by gaining positional advantage on that round. Of course, in this case you would revert back to early position in the next round.

Position can be relative

A player's position is always relative to the other players. If you raised in the under the gun position and everyone folded except the big blind, you are now in last position after the Flop. You would then have the same positional advantage as if you were on the button. If you raised in middle position and two players in late position called your raise, while everyone else folds, then all of a sudden you are in early position because you will have to act first on every round with two players to act after you. With the exception of the small blind and the button, all of the other players' relative position can change depending on which players are still in the hand. Here is a chart of the relative positions of each player pre-Flop in 7-handed to 10-handed games.

The numbers in the table refer to the position of the players. 1 means the player is first to act, 2 means second to act, etc.

Number of Players	7 players	8 players	9 players	10 players
Blinds	1, 2	1, 2	1, 2	1, 2
Early Position (including under the gun)	3, 4	3, 4	3, 4, 5	3, 4, 5
Middle Position	5	5, 6	6, 7	6, 7, (8)
Late Position (including the cutoff and the button)	6, 7	7, 8	8, 9	(8), 9, 10

Note - The 8th player in a 10-handed game could be considered in middle position or late position depending on how aggressive and loose the 9th and 10th players play.

In the Starting Hands chapter, position with regards to the pre-Flop round is discussed in full detail. Here are some general thoughts on the different positions.

Early Position, the Small Blind, the Big Blind and the Under the Gun player

Players in early position are at a positional disadvantage, and they are likely to be at a positional disadvantage throughout the whole hand. For the non-blind hands, this means they must be more selective with starting hands than do the players in the later positions. For example, a hand like ATo on the button may look like a good hand to raise with if everyone else has folded. But in early position, the chance that another player may come with a raise or a cold call is high. There is approximately a 91% chance that any random hand is worse than ATo (see the chapter on Starting Hands). A player who open raises with ATo on the button only has two other players to contend with, the small blind and the big blind. If 91% of all hands are worse than ATo, then there is an 82.8% (91% raised to the 2nd power) chance that ATo is the best hand between the button and the two blind hands. So this is a situation where a player with ATo would be happy to raise since it is likely that he has the best hand. However, if the same player had the same hand in the under the gun position (the first player to act after the blinds), and it was a 10 handed game, then there are 9 other players who could have a better hand. Using the same analysis, if each one of those players had a 91% chance to have a worse hand than ATo, then there is only a 42.8% (91% raised to the 9th power) chance that ATo is the best hand. Add in the positional disadvantage that ATo will have to contend with on the Flop, the Turn and the River, and now it becomes a hand worthy of being thrown into the muck. Also, when ATo is the best hand, it may not have a big advantage over any starting hand except a hand with an A and a lower kicker. But if it is not the best hand, it is in danger of being a big underdog to the likes of AK, KK and TT. So when another player calls or raises, the player with ATo is looking at a situation where he is usually a small favorite or a big underdog. These are not profitable situations in Hold'em.

The blinds have the benefit of seeing everyone act before they have to act in the pre-Flop round, but they have the disadvantage of having to act first in all subsequent rounds as well as having to involuntarily put money into the pot before the cards are even dealt. Many players will call a raise

from the blind position in the pre-Flop round because they believe they are already partially invested. Unfortunately for them, this thinking is flawed. The chips they have put up as their blinds are a sunk cost, and should be thought of as part of the pot. The old adages of “do not chase good money after bad” applies here. A player in the blinds should make his decisions based on the chips that are going to go from his stack into the pot, not the chips that he has already put into the pot.

The small blind is in the worst position of all, because he is always at a positional disadvantage to someone else. If everyone folds to the blinds, then the small blind is at a significant disadvantage to the big blind. There are many times when the big blind can call a raise with mediocre cards, but the small blind cannot. The reason is that the small blind will have to put in more money than the big blind, and the big blind is getting better odds. Since the big blind is already in for one small bet, when there is a raise, he is at least getting 3.5 to 1 to call (1 small bet is the big blind he put up himself, 2 small bets from the raiser, and a minimum of half of a small bet from the small blind). If there are other players involved in the hand, then the big blind would have even greater odds to call. However, the small blind has to act before the big blind. He would have to put in one and a half small bets to see a raise, and he would have to act without knowing what the big blind will do. If the big blind folds after the small blind calls, then the call by the small blind effectively gives him odds of 3.5 to 1.5 (2.33 to 1). These odds are worse than were shown for the big blind. If the big blind were to call after the small blind called, then the small blind would be getting odds of 3 to 1. These odds are still worse than the big blind's odds. Also note that if the small blind calls, he is now offering the big blind 5 to 1 to call and see the Flop. If there are many players who have invested two bets, then there is a smaller difference between the small blind and the big blind. It is when the hand looks like it will be contested by only two or three players that the small blind position becomes such a weak position compared to the big blind. This is more relevant in short-handed games and is discussed in further detail in those chapters.

The big blind has better reasons to call a raise and see the Flop than the small blind does. As mentioned previously, if there is only one raise, the big blind at worst will be getting 3.5 to 1 to see the Flop, and usually better. This means he can play hands such as 98s or 76s that he may not in other positions. His poor position after the Flop can be enough to negate the advantage of only having to put in one more small bet to see the Flop when there is a raise. This can be seen when a tight early position player raises and the big blind holds a hand such as A9o. This is the type of hand that can easily be coordinated with an early position player's hand, since many players will raise with hands such as AK or AQ. If an A hits the board, the big blind cannot necessarily be happy. In such a case, it may be better to play a hand such as JTs, which has more drawing possibilities than a hand like A9o, so JTs would match up better against AK than A9o would.

Even though players in early position are at a positional disadvantage, there are still some strategies they can use due to their position that others cannot. One of those strategies is the check-raise. An early position player can check-raise to get more money into the pot or to try to knock out players if it is a late position player who makes the initial bet on the Flop. Since the check-raise is one of the few advantages that early position players enjoy, they should use it often when they think they have the best hand and there is evidence that a player in late position will bet when it is checked to him.

Another strategy that the first player to act can apply is the first chance to bluff. If there is a hand where all the other players have shown weakness, the first player to act has the first chance to bluff into the pot on a later round. For example, two limpers call, the small blind folds and you check in the big blind.

Your hand in the big blind: T3o

Flop: Q-5-2 rainbow

Everyone checks on the Flop.

Turn: 5

You now have a nice opportunity to be the first player to bluff into the pot. Unless one of the other players was slowplaying his hand on the pre-Flop round or the Flop, being the first to bluff has value.

Middle Position

Middle position players have some of the disadvantages of the early position players and some of the advantages of the late position players. Middle position players can see the actions of the early position players, but they still have a few players behind them yet to act. In the pre-Flop round, middle position players can open raise with a few more hands than early position players can since there is a smaller chance that a player in a later position will have a better hand (because there are fewer players in a later position to the middle position player). But their list of raisable hands cannot be expanded by too much beyond that of the early position players.

After the Flop, the relative position of the middle position player is the most prone to change. If a middle position player raised pre-Flop and everybody behind him folded, but one or both of the blinds call, then the middle position player is now a late position player since he will be last to act in all subsequent rounds. On the other hand, if the only player to stay in the hand with the middle position player is a late position player, then the middle position player would be in early position as he is the first to act after the Flop. A player's position may not be static throughout a hand, and it is the middle position player's position that is the most prone to change after the Flop.

Late Position, the Cutoff and the Button

The button is the last to act on all rounds with the exception of deferring to the blinds in the pre-Flop round. The button has the greatest positional advantage of any player on the table as he can see how everyone has acted before he has to act. The cutoff player is to the right of the button, and if the button folds, then the cutoff becomes the "button", in the sense that he will be the last to act on all subsequent rounds. In fact, any player who becomes last to act on the Flop and beyond becomes the de facto button.

Players in late position have the best chance to apply the strategy of raising for free cards, since they have the option to check on the Turn when acting last. If a player in early position tried that strategy, it would not have the same effect since they have to act first on the next round. Thus, a late position player would see the early position player's action on the next round before the late

position player has to act. Players in late position can also apply the free showdown semi-bluff raise. This strategy is a raise on the Turn with the intention of checking on the River and showing down their hand if they do not improve, but betting if they do improve. These strategies are discussed in other chapters of this book.

The Importance of Position when dealing with Pot Odds

In the chapter on Pot Odds, it was shown why there is value to being the player to close the action, meaning there are no other players left to act. The advantage of this is the number of bets you have to put into the pot cannot increase after you have acted. For example, if there are 10 big bets in the pot and you are last to act on that round with a bet facing you, you can decide to call or fold. If you call and you are the last to act, then you know you are getting 10:1 pot odds to call. However if there was another player who has yet to act, it is possible he may raise, and now if you want to continue with the hand, you will have to put in an additional bet into the pot. This means your estimation of the number of bets you have to put into the pot was incorrect and your estimations of whether or not you have enough pot odds to call were completely thrown off. For a player who is in a relative late position to the bettor, his late position provides a nice advantage since he would be sure of the pot odds. However for a player who is in a relative early position, he may be surprised that the pot odds are lower than he had thought since there may be a raise after he has called.